Determined Goodwill

December 9, 2022

When we think of people we love, people who’ve been good to us, it’s easy for thoughts of goodwill to come to the mind. But it’s not the case when there are people who’ve done harm to us or done harm to the world at large. It’s very easy to wish for those people to suffer some in order to realize, come to their mercy and see the harm they’ve done. That’s what we think. But if we have that attitude, we’re in danger. Because we might decide that we’re the ones who have to impose this suffering on them. And then that becomes a karma. This is why the Buddha recommended that we develop goodwill as a brahma-vihara, a sublime attitude, something that’s higher than the normal human attitude of goodwill. It’s a form of mindfulness. You have to work at keeping it in mind. It doesn’t come naturally. And as he said, we have to be determined on this mindfulness. So it’s good to think about what the Buddha said about determination. As he said, all of the phenomena we experience come from desire. And ordinarily our desires pull in all directions. It’s like we’re tied to four different horses pulling us in four different directions, like when they used to draw and quarter people. Our minds are drawn and quartered by various desires. And thus we desire to bring some order to them. When you realize that going in all directions at once is not wise, and it doesn’t really accomplish anything, we have to learn how to focus our desires on what really is worthwhile. That’s what determination means. You’re going to decide that something is really important and other things have to come secondary to it. And there are four qualities that you need to develop for your determination to succeed. The first is discernment. In the case of goodwill, this means discerning what goodwill is and how you create it in the mind. The second is having goodwill. In the case of goodwill, you have to have goodwill for people you don’t like, or people who have been cruel. You want them to change their ways of thinking. You want them to change their ways of thinking. You want them to come to their senses. And again, you can’t force this on them, but you hope that they will come to their senses of their own accord. And you’re happy to do whatever you can to help them. You don’t feel like you have to see justice done before they’re going to be happy. Because all too often, the desire to see justice done just causes more harm. Think of the case of Angulimala. He was the bandit who had killed scores of people. And yet the Buddha saw that he had potential. So he ended up teaching Angulimala to the point where Angulimala became an Arahant. Often we like to hear this story because we figure there’s hope for a bandit, there’s hope for us. But at the same time, we have to realize that he literally got away with murder. And there were people who were not happy about that. Sometimes when he went on his alms round, people would throw things at him. One time he came back with his bowl broken, his robe torn, his head bleeding. The Buddha saw this and said, just think about how much more he would have suffered if he hadn’t gained that attainment. But still, those people, having wounded an Arahant, had made a lot of money. They had karma for themselves. So the desire for justice is not necessarily always a skillful desire. The desire that people mend their ways is a skillful desire. You want to cultivate that. Realize the wisdom of that desire. Learn to foster it. So you need to do some analysis of what it means to foster a desire that doesn’t necessarily come easy. We think about the three kinds of fabrication. The way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself, in technical terms, directed thought and evaluation, and the perceptions and feelings you focus on. So when you’re practicing goodwill, breathe in a way that feels comfortable. Breathe in comfortable ways and allow the sense of comfort to spread through the body. It’s a very quick way of showing goodwill for yourself. And when you have goodwill for yourself this way, treat yourself well this way, then it’s a lot easier to have goodwill for others. And then talk to yourself. There are cases where it’s difficult to feel goodwill. Reason with yourself. Evaluate your reasons for resisting goodwill. And come up with good arguments against them. After all the Buddha said having ill will is a form of wrong view. An interesting idea. We think of ill will as a form of wrong resolve. But it’s also a wrong view. Thinking that the desire to see somebody suffer would actually accomplish your goals of getting rid of suffering. But it will not. It’ll make it easier for you to misbehave around that person. So reason with yourself. We usually don’t think of meditation as being a process of thinking. We think of it as not thinking. But remember, directed thought and evaluation are a component of the first jhana. When you’re trying to get the mind to settle down, you do have to think about what you’re doing. Getting the mind so that it fits. Fits well with its object. Is at ease with its object. And in this case, make sure that your mind actually agrees with the idea of goodwill as something you should make universal. And the images you hold in mind. The Buddha recommends holding the image of the earth. No matter what other people do. No matter how much they misbehave. Think of that as a man coming along and saying, I want the earth to be without earth. So he digs here and spits there and urinates here and there. Hoping for the earth to be without earth. But the earth is just so much more vast. His efforts seem puny and ridiculous in comparison. So when people mistreat you, think of that. Their efforts are puny and ridiculous in comparison with the amount of goodwill you can muster. Think of your goodwill as being like the river Ganges. And someone comes along and tries to set fire to the water. But water doesn’t burn. Think of your goodwill as being like space. People come and try to scribble pictures and words on space, but there’s no place for it to stick. Again, when people abuse you and people mistreat you, think of them writing on space. And that perception, that image that you hold in mind, can make it a lot easier to deal with difficult things. And of course, as the Buddha mentioned, the bandits who have pinned you down. You can’t move and they’re using a two-handled saw to cut you up into little pieces. The Buddha says, even in a case like that, you should have goodwill for them. Because if you have ill will, and then you die from being cut up like that, you’re going to go to a bad place. You may be reborn through the desire to get revenge. And that kind of rebirth is not going to be a good one. So for your own sake, have goodwill for them. Then if you think, well, even if people are cutting you up with a saw, you should have goodwill. It makes it easier to have goodwill for people who are doing less drastic things. And of course, the feeling is a metal fiber. You induce that, one, through the way you breathe, and then two, the way you think about your position of being above the fray. There’s a sense of well-being that comes from that. So that’s how you give rise to a sense of goodwill. And it feels solid and it feels secure. Because it’s well-based in the body and the mind. So that’s the first factor in a determination, is discernment. The second one is truth. You really stick with this. It’s not the case that you cultivate goodwill where you sit here with your eyes closed and then forget about it when you get up. You try to carry that attitude into all of your interactions. You’re going to have to let go of a lot of attitudes, too. That’s the third aspect of a good determination. There are things you’re going to have to sacrifice. Your desire for justice, your desire to get back at someone. Sometimes your desire to have the other person recognize the damage they’ve done for your own sake. You’re going to have it for their sake. Otherwise you can desire for them to come to their senses. But as for your desire for them to recognize the pain that you’ve suffered, learn how to let that go. Because there’s so much that people have trouble forgiving because of that. And it just keeps the old wounds open. You think about the things that have been done to you that were harmful, were hurtful. And you remind yourself, you’ve got karma. Nobody is born pure into the human world. Some people say thinking about karma is bad for goodwill. Because you think about other people with their bad karma and how they deserve to suffer. It’s simply that if they do something unskillful and they don’t change their attitude, there will be suffering. But people can change their attitude. A change in your mind can have a huge impact on how you feel the results of past karma. So whatever suffering you’ve had, chalk it up to old karma. But you don’t have to keep on suffering from it. The Buddha is not forcing you to develop a wise attitude like this, a calm attitude like this. But he’s saying it is possible. And you see that it is in your own best interest. This teaches you to develop a sense of equanimity to go along with the goodwill. As John Fung used to say, if your goodwill cannot be backed up by equanimity, it’s going to cause suffering. Because there will be a lot of cases where you won’t be able to do it. You want to see people become skillful and they don’t. There are a lot of cases where you want to see someone actually be happy. People that you like, you want to see them be happy. But their karma gets in the way. So not to suffer from that, you have to develop equanimity. That’s why we have that chant for equanimity. All beings are the owners of their actions. It’s a statement of fact. Goodwill is a wish. Compassion is a wish. Empathetic joy is a wish. May all beings be happy. May they be freed from their suffering. May they maintain their happiness. But when you get to equanimity, it’s a reality check. It’s a statement of fact. There are a lot of things that will not go the way you want them to. But you don’t want that to be a blemish on your goodwill. You don’t want your goodwill to have to depend on other people’s goodness. Because if it does, well, you’ve seen the nature of other people’s goodness. It’s not all that reliable. You want something in your own mind that you can rely on, which is why you have to stick with this determination. Be discerning in how you understand goodwill and how you cultivate goodwill in your own mind. Be true to the principles of goodwill in all your actions. Don’t just sacrifice any attitudes that would get in the way. And keep the mind calm as you do this. If you can develop these four aspects of a good determination and goodwill, then it does become more and more solid. It has a chance to become a sublime attitude, or what they say, an unlimited attitude, an immeasurable attitude. So that image of goodwill being like the earth is not just an image. It actually is a quality of the goodwill that you’ve cultivated. And remember you’re doing this for your own good. You don’t want to question whether other people deserve your goodwill. You need your goodwill in all situations. And when you really understand what that means, then it becomes a lot easier to cultivate goodwill so that it does go beyond measure. You lift it above human goodwill, partial goodwill, partisan goodwill. And it becomes something universal.

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